



# NIGHT MATTERS

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It's always night

or we wouldn't need light.

- Thelonious Monk

ABSTRACT

Night and nighttime spaces have historically acted as environments of transgression, liberation and resistance, as havens from the outside world and the routine of everyday life. What allowed for emancipation within these spaces to occur was, to a great extent, their ability to perform as counter-environments to the norm of daily life. Besides the physical, literal mirror that night posed to daytime, it also acted as a mirror to people's daily lives and behaviors enabling them to explore further, discover and express their true selves.

The increased surveillance, control and monetization of those environments as well as the shift towards a 24-hour, liquid society have resulted in a normalized, conformist, less critical experience or alternative way of living that results in a numbing rather than emancipating effect. The aim of this thesis is to re-establish the social role of the party and its effects by examining and analyzing the spatial, and other, characteristics that make up such environments.

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To Elli and Fotis.  
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# I

## INTRODUCTION

Media theorist Marshal McLuhan described ‘counterblast’ as an indication for “the need of a counter-environment as a means of perceiving the dominant one.” (McLuhan, 1970, p.5) By escaping one’s dominant environment, at least momentarily, one is able to understand it, reflect and challenge it.

Starting from the context of the night and darkness as such a transgressive, counter-environment and tracing its evolution in interior spaces, nightclubs, this thesis aims to highlight the importance of space itself as an instrument of rebellion and as an alternative way of experiencing society.

One might think that the topic of nightclubs as spaces of revolt, emancipation and escape can better be addressed via social and political studies rather than architecture. By creating space with ‘secondary’ architectural means nightclubs are also suggestive of alternative social structures based mostly on instinctive, sensorial premises rather than institutional ones.

In recent times, the nightclub’s inclusive approach towards society may not be as radical anymore, either because discotheques are more profit-oriented, funded by business entrepreneurs rather than hangouts of passionate groups of people, or, the less likely case, that our societies have reached a homogenized, democratic approach towards ‘the other’.

Since I find that there is still potential for further social inclusion in our current communities, I find that the discotheque<sup>1</sup>, as the ‘class emancipator/ ‘classless’ incubator’ might be a good way to continue exploring further possibilities of togetherness. As part of a generation who’s physical social encounters are wearing thin and replaced by virtual, technological substitutes I find the discotheque to be a physical outpost that should be sustained for its character as a fundamentally physical, communal experience.

I will begin by exploring the night and darkness’s natural, cultural and social qualities and their effect on people’s behavior. Then I shall refer to the progression of those qualities from the public realm to the interior space of the nightclub and how such spaces catered to the ongoing sociopolitical conditions of the time. Following that, I will refer to the current state of our society and make a case for the importance of the continuing existence of such social, communal spaces. Lastly, I will explore the architecture of the discotheque and what the elements exactly are that constitute its experience and from there on I will propose a version that shall respond to the current, liquid state of our world.

<sup>1</sup> I shall be using the words ‘nightclub’ and ‘discotheque’/ disco alternatively, referring essentially to the same spatial typology

# II

# THE NIGHT

**Darkness and obscurity are banished by artificial lighting, and the seasons by air conditioning. Night and summer are losing their charm and dawn is disappearing. The urban population think they have escaped from cosmic reality, but there is no corresponding expansion of their dream life. The reason is clear: dreams spring from reality and are realized in it.**

Ivan Chtcheglov(1953) – The Situationists

**Darkness, sight and other senses**

Night is considered to be the part of every twenty-four-hour period during which the lack of sunlight creates a dark environment. There is a primal fear related to darkness that has evolved into our mental concept of its dangerous, evil character, rooted to a series of misconceptions, stories, natural phenomena such as the aurora borealis or lunar eclipses, considered in the past to be supernatural or marks of Gods' wrath (Ekrich, 2005). Many of these fears or misconceptions regarding night have been alleviated by progress in science and the general skepticism that prevailed in most of the western world.

One of the most logical explanations that is still relevant however is the very existence of darkness itself, which instantly limits one's vision. The most treasured sense, sight, is weakened and thus our surroundings transform and take different shapes in the shadows. Anthony Synnott in "The Eye and I: A Sociology of Sight" makes a case for sight's supremacy to the rest of the senses, equating it with nobility and reason through a series of references to folk sayings, religious texts and ancient Greek philosophic writings among others. With the lack of sight, other senses come to the forefront of perception and understanding and they may allow people out at night to gain a better, or deeper knowledge of their environment, others and themselves. As Walter Ong pointed out, "to say that 'knowing is like seeing', is also to rob knowledge of its interiority", and he goes on to explain how sight limits our understanding to the surface while knowledge is incremental and is thus limited by the dominance of sight. (Ong, 1977, p.122) During nighttime, as other senses and elements become amplified, such as sounds, scents, textures and movements, so does one's understanding become deeper and more holistic in its approach. The psychiatrist Eugène Minkowski has defined light space as visual space while dark space is to him “much more ‘filled’” and entails all five senses. As he mentions in Lived Time, “it seems much more material to me, much more “filled” than light space, which as we have seen, fades away, so to speak, before the materiality of the objects which are in it... while the ego is permeable by darkness it is not permeable by light.” (Minkowski, 1970, p. 429) In the lack of light we are able to explore or bring to the surface parts of our selves that we might suppress during daytime, while we are also more acceptable to the other selves of others.

The increasing use of electric light, a symbol of progress, has been put to use from homes to the streets to eliminate dangerous and immoral acts associated with the invisibility of darkness. Electric light, “the ultimate badge of metropolitan modernity” (Beaumont, 2016) reinstated vision's supremacy by creating “a permanently illuminated space.” (Esteve, 2015, p.55)

More a tool of social and economic control than anything else, with artificial light “sight became the controlling instrument for

universal normativization that Foucault would point out.” (Esteve, 2015, p.55)

**Cultures and activities of the night**

As the natural backdrop or rather the opposite of day, in older times night possessed a culture of its own, with its own code system, customs and habits. The lack of natural light allowed for a certain anonymity and camouflage in the streets and “afforded sanctuary from ordinary existence, the chance, as shadows lengthened, for men and women to express inner impulses and realize repressed desires both in their waking hours and in their dreams, however innocent or sinister in nature.” (Ekirch, 2005, xxvi) As we share a primal fear for darkness, the patterns in our nocturnal behaviors are also in many ways common to all, shaping thus a far more uniform community than that of daytime. As Roger Ekrich notes, “nocturnal culture was by no means monolithic, but people were more alike in their attitudes and conventions than they were different.” (Ekrich, 2005, xxvii) On the other hand, people who are not enchanted by the night have always perceived it as sinister or threatening, and its people as up to no good.

The people who find refuge in the transgressive environment of darkness may come from different social classes and with different motives. Historically certain groups of people have been associated with the night, such as witches, religious heretics, prostitutes, slaves, lonely men, criminals and revolutionaries among others as historian Bryan Palmer discusses in Cultures of Darkness (2000). A haven for “all the city's internal exiles” (Beaumont, 2016, p. 3) but also for single individuals, who seek the ephemeral escape from daytime's overbearing formalities, nighttime has posed an emancipatory backdrop for alternative ways of experiencing reality, contrary to our daily existence.

This emancipatory character of the night is also partly due to the activities that take place during its course and are usually in opposition to those that dominate daytime (when considering a typical day worker), especially regarding their value in the society. In the modern world whatever one does is usually measured by value in terms of productivity or profit and our time is increasingly spent focused on those. Jonathan Crary makes a good remark when he mentions, “sleep is an uncompromising interruption of the theft of time from us by capitalism” (Crary, 2013, p.10) since this particular activity, inextricably linked to the night, is one of the few ways we can resist the twenty-four-hour working scheme imposed by neoliberal economic patterns. Sleep however, as much as it may be a natural, physical necessity, it may also be thought of as a way to prevent people from wandering the streets at night, disciplining them and reducing in this way crimes and other undesirable activities. Old proverbs such as “early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy,

wealthy and wise” may suggest society’s desired patterns for the course of everyday human activity.

Additionally it may be considered as an idle, passive activity, at least in the way it is taking place now, while it occupies less and less of our twenty-four-hour cycles. Even further, it is a time necessary to refuel in order to be well-functioning members of the society the next day, marking it thus as less counter-productive. Nightwalking on the other hand, or engaging in other nighttime activities that break one’s normal cycle may be considered as more transgressive, emancipatory acts. Matthew Beaumont discusses the state of nightlife during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and refers to it as a “distinct social phenomenon”. (Beaumont, 2016) What was interesting about the way people made use of their night hours was that it was increasingly popular to stay out all night dancing, gambling and drinking and then stay in bed the next day. The reason for that, as Beaumont highlights was because “it dramatized an aristocratic refusal of the protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism.” (Beaumont, 2016) The clash between these people walking home the next morning and the rest who were walking to work was in itself an emancipatory moment for both sides.

However, considering the latest developments in our socioeconomic and political system, spanning from new labor conditions where one can work anytime and from anywhere, to increased surveillance and lighting of the streets, the institutional boundaries between work and leisure and day and night are increasingly blurred, marking it thus harder to distinct the qualities that assign to the night in general its escapist, transgressive character.

“Daylight all night long”

During the early nineties a group of Russian astronomers set on a mission to place a giant mirror in space that would reflect sunlight on the dark side of the Earth, extending daytime hours and cutting back on energy costs used to illuminate the night. Despite the success of the first experiment in 1992 the project was never fully realized, while there were objections from several directions. As Jonathan Crary discusses in 24/7 there were objections from humanitarian and cultural groups among others “who argue that the night sky is a commons to which all of humanity is entitled to have access, and that the ability to experience the darkness of night and observe the stars is a basic human right that no corporation can nullify.” (Crary, 2013, p.5) He then goes on to argue that if the night sky is indeed a privilege then it “is already being violated for over half of the world’s population in cities that are enveloped continuously in a penumbra of smog and high intensity illumination.” (Ibid.) Maybe the Russian plan did not succeed in turning night into day with its totalitarian approach, but the continuous pursuit to “colonize” the night by introducing daytime elements and habits is proving increasingly

successful. As Beaumont (2016) remarks, we can no longer dismiss such dreams of the night’s elimination as science fiction.

There is of course a distinction to be made between urban and rural settings, as human intervention has been far more intense in cities starting from the introduction of candles and oil lamps, to gaslights and finally electric lighting. In the progressive elimination of the night additional artifacts were slowly embedded in its environment, such as electric billboards, lit store window displays, decorative light installations and CCTV cameras.

Design historian Lucius Burckhardt who has extensively written on the field of Spaziergangswissenschaften, on wandering through the city, identifies the night as “a man-made construct, comprised of opening hours, closing times, price scales, timetables, habits and streetlamps.” (Burckhardt, 1980) The increasing regulation and ‘construction’ of the night points to nighttime politics concerned mostly with its economy and value, while its origin almost coincides with the establishment of capitalism as the dominant mode of production. In order to exploit the twenty-four-hour cycle and the city and extract “the value of both labour and leisure from the night” (Beaumont, 2016), all the things mentioned above are employed mostly due to profit opportunities. As Burckhardt mentions, the night is in urgent need of redesigning, which may raise questions on the regulating policies’ intentions of providing safety and comfort for everyone. As much as it is argued that streetlamps have allowed, for example, women to roam the streets at night feeling safer, still “some people have freer and fuller access to the city at night than others.” (Beaumont, 2016) Until this day women are made to feel unsafe in many places, and people of color “are far more likely to be criminalized in western cities than white men at night.” (ibid)

As much as our society valorizes daytime and the diurnal way of conduct as the ‘norm’, the potential of the night and darkness to act as counter-methods of experiencing our surroundings and exploring alternative ways of being is still relevant and to that extend should be preserved.



fig. 1 Night view of Witte de Withstraat (Angelopoulou, 2017)

III

THE PAST  
FROM THE  
STREET TO THE  
DANCEFLOOR

With the industrial revolution, gas lighting allowed stores and factories to stay open for longer hours. Its effect on nightlife was also notable, since cities, streets and interiors could be lighted for longer hours and on a larger scale. While that was received positively and resulted in a flourishing nightlife, the effect it had on the freedom that the streets held was to significantly diminish it. Consequently one may argue that while light was permitting longer cycles of public activity it gradually limited the freedom that darkness provided for society's dispossessed.

Once the streets at night were not as transgressive or liberating as before, a series of interior spaces, aided by the large-scale availability of electric lighting, appeared in its place. Bars, taverns and saloons were common nighttime destinations that opened up space for interaction among all social classes and as Christine Sismondo notes, "in taverns people could mix together: you see men drinking alongside the people they work for." (Dalzell and Sismondo, 2011) The relative equality people encountered in those spaces along with the frankness and directness that alcohol granted set the grounds for the fundamentally rebellious, non-conforming character of those environments. A key incident where the sociopolitical importance of the bar can be traced is the Stonewall riots of 1969, where Sismondo mentions, "during the McCarthy era the police regularly shut the bars down, denying gays of their fundamental right to associate. When they'd had enough and it came time to organize, the networks were already in place through the bars." (ibid)

Even if they existed already for a few decades before that, it was around the time of the Stonewall Riots incident that a certain type of nighttime spaces emerged. The nightclub, just as the night, provided the anonymity, privacy and liberty similar to that of the streets at night before the electric era. As Alex Needham suggests in the article *The Club is a Church*, nightclubs were "pockets of resistance to the oppression of the daytime world". (Needham, n.d.) First introduced in the US as discotheques - or discothèques, as they were a French import by Oliver Coquelin in 1962, by 1965 New York could already count fifteen of them, constituting a new trend in the city's nightlife. Jukeboxes, the 1950's popular, coin-operated, automated machines, were being replaced by Disk Jockeys and as Tim Lawrence quotes from the Times, "the common denominator of the discothèque is darkness, a small dance floor and the beat". (Lawrence, 2003, p.14)

### The politics of pleasure in 1970's New York

The political and social rebellions that took place in the sixties, the civil rights demonstrations, the anti war, gay rights and feminist movements all set the ground for the formation of more tolerant, egalitarian communities that succeeded mostly within the countercultural realm of the nightclubs. A key figure of the time, David Mancuso was the

legendary host of the Loft, a subterranean, Broadway loft party that first took place on Valentine's Day 1970 with the nuanced title *Love Saves the Day*. As Mancuso explains to Tim Lawrence "a lot of people were bonding and making relationships because of the Vietnam War and Martin Luther King. There were all the ingredients for a really good soup." While he continues by explaining the relation between the demonstrations and dancing, "I was on the streets and in the party. Dancing and politics were on the same wavelength, and the Loft created a little social progress in tune with the times." (Lawrence, 2003, p.51)

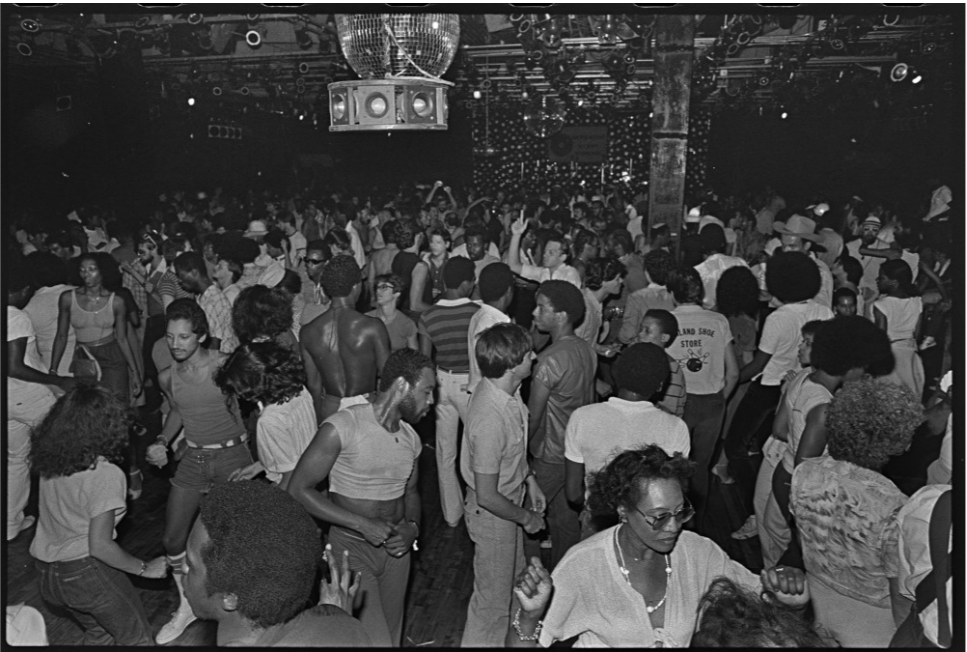


fig 2. Legendary New York discotheque Paradise Garage (Bernstein,1979)

With the raise of discotheques and the music that increasingly accompanied the dance floors, Disco, a mix of soul, funk and pop, an alternative, counter-way of experiencing reality and ones body was coming into being. Richard Dyer (1979), who has written extensively on films and entertainment and the representation of sexuality, gender and race in them, described the effect of disco in his article, *In Defense of Disco*:

Its passion and intensity embody or create an experience that negates the dreariness of the mundane and everyday. It gives us a glimpse of what it means to live at the height of our emotional and experiential capacities - not dragged down by the banality of organized routine life. Given that everyday banality, work, domesticity, ordinary sexism, and racism are rooted in the structures of class and gender of this society, the flight from that banality can be seen as a flight from capitalism and patriarchy as lived experiences.

The "nonlinguistic practices" (Lawrence, 2013) of the discotheque 'rallied' for an alternative way of experiencing sexuality, race and class, marking it thus more alike than different to the activist demonstrations that were taking place in the streets at the time.

### Italy 1965-1975

Across the Atlantic, greatly influenced by what was going on in New York and particularly by the Electric Circus (formerly known as the Dom), a discotheque on St. Marks Place associated with Andy Warhol, a group of young architects in Italy, known as the Radicals, began to design a series of discos of their own. Radical design emerged in Italy in the early sixties and evolved around the rejection of modernism and the critique of such architecture, and to an extend the capitalistic practices that it developed around, through 'anti-design', exaggerated, kitsch, ironic and fun design proposals. The *Pipers*, named after the first one that opened in Rome in 1965, emerged in several Italian cities along with other discos such as Mach 2 by Superstudio in 1967 and Space Electronic by Gruppo 9999 in 1969 in Florence. On a conversation between myself and Dr. Catharine Rossi (2017), the co-curator of *Radical Disco: Architecture and Nightlife in Italy, 1965 – 1975*, she mentioned:

There's a reason why it was the radical architects who took on this typology. Because although the radicals didn't design the first discos in Italy and weren't the only ones designing discos in Italy, I think they were the ones overturning both the conventional ambitions of architecture and design but also the conventional media that you use to communicate. They recognized that in the discotheque, this new typology, in its newness it had a certain freedom to it. Also in the type of spaces that clubs were, where they were much more participatory, democratic and freeing, they saw that they were perfect to try out different ideas and different kinds of relationships between architecture and people, the people who use them.

In relation to their New York counterparts, Italian discos where a lot more experimental with spatial forms and much more aware of their impact on architecture. Sylvia Lavin discusses how the use of strobe lights, projections, performers, music and passersby as "constituent elements" assigned to architecture the notion of a "supermedium characterized by the exaggeration of ambient effects, the delamination of architectural experience from the technical support of building, and the thickening of the architectural surface to the superimposition of new layers of mediatized matter." (Lavin, 2014, p.102)

On a sociopolitical level however they were created with a similar purpose, that of creating communities and physical, gathering, common spaces. Fabrizio Capolei (2016), the son of one of the Piper architects explains:



fig. 3 Space Electronic by Gruppo 9999 during the Mondial Festival (Caldini, 1971)

The goal was to create psychological and physical spaces that enabled like-minded young people from various social backgrounds to meet and to give the club a pre-established sense of community, bringing people together to create a series of unique, psychically-charged encounters... The Piper Club was an answer to the needs of young people who wanted to stay together, to communicate, to have relationships. Through them, the culture of the city and its facilities, began to transform.

Following the course of history from then onwards on nightclubs and their inextricable link to the progression of dance music, tells an interesting story. During the eighties house music, a mutation of disco, emerged in Chicago while almost at the same time techno, a more computerized, technological genre, took shape in Detroit. In the late eighties and early nineties, techno took over Europe, particularly the United Kingdom where rave culture was born, and post-wall Berlin, where it played a significant role in the reunification between East and West Berlin. The common denominator in all those electronic music genres and subcultures is that they emerged and evolved among mostly terrible urban conditions and economic

decay. In such conditions they provided ground for experimentation and escape from the outside world while in most cases they played an important role in the improvement of those conditions and the growth of their cities. Tim Lawrence discusses on a conversation with Alex Needham how New York City during the seventies and eighties was represented in the media as a city of crime, decay and danger. Yet after having talked to over five hundred different people about their own experiences of that period, he concludes that it was also a time of freedom, culture, music in the streets and social engagement. (Needham, n.d.)

In conclusion, the nightclub's contribution, which no other nighttime space achieved, was the inclusiveness of outsiders to the mainstream society. By becoming fashionable they provided an inclusive environment harboring people of all kinds of race, gender and class, thus bringing them into contact. As a result it aided in the emancipation and inclusion of marginal groups in the society *outside* of the club. While the streets at night provided a safe space for society's outcasts to occupy within the twenty-four hour cycle, the nightclub ushered their way into daytime.

While conditions in cities have radically improved (at least in the western world), urbanization has increased rapidly and technology has made social interactions far more instantaneous, "despite their connective potential, online communities can never replicate the physical sensation of dancing all night." (Needham, n.d.) Although those urban, rough, external conditions that gave rise to collective spaces in the sixties and seventies have not been essentially alleviated, it is possible that technology has given rise to albeit inadequate substitutes of contact between people and has placated the need for physical contact.

# IV

## THE LIQUID FUTURE: THE POLITICS OF THE NIGHTCLUB

To design something that addresses the present and future of physical social space, we must first define the current sociopolitical conditions. Talking of modernity and post-modernity, or as he defines it *liquid modernity*, Zygmunt Bauman constructs a very accurate representation of our current state of being. “Change is the only permanence and uncertainty is the only certainty... Flexibility has replaced solidity as the ideal condition to be pursued of things and affairs.” (Bauman, 2000, p.viii-ix)

Coincidentally, if one observes a club night during its course, one might find in it a quite accurate representation of our society at large. The atmosphere, dark and filled with smoke and colored rays of light; the crowd, seemingly lost and captivated by the multi-sensorial spectacle of which they are both performers and watchers simultaneously. In sociopolitical, cultural and economical terms it seems we are in this constant state of flux, unaware of our current condition or any direction we might be into tomorrow. To recall Bauman, “unlike our ancestors, we don’t have a clear image of a ‘destination’ towards which we seem to be moving – which needs to be a model of global society, a global economy, global politics, a global jurisdiction...Instead, we react to the latest trouble, experimenting, groping in the dark.” (Bauman, 2000, p. vii)

Club culture may appear less radical in recent times, influenced by neoliberal notions and profit-oriented policies that sometimes extend beyond the realm of the night. As Tom Glencross (2017) points out:

These dominant discourses of neoliberalism dictate almost every aspect of our lives. They include manic regulatory practices, constant assessment of our selves and our experiences, and a division of our world into analytical moments. In this frame, our relationships with art are transactions of cultural capital, credentials we exchange with others to manoeuvre ourselves in competitive social fields and marketplaces. (Glencross, 2017)

Amidst such neoliberal, capitalist practices that have overtaken most of our ways and habits in our everyday life, the question is, how can we make sure that the discotheque can remain a relevant institution for social experimentation and emancipation. As Glencross (2017) continues:

Though for many of us the idea of fluidity in gender and identity is a long-realised understanding, creating spaces and moments of praxis where this realisation can happen for as many of us as possible is certainly jeopardized when neoliberalism and the marketplace go blatantly unquestioned in the club space.

If one adds to that the increasing entertainment laws, control, surveillance, regulation restrictions and timetables it may seem that nightclubs do not have much left to offer. However, as such things

have always existed, it is merely a matter of club culture finding its way through and reorganizing to respond to current conditions. Furthermore, we can begin to imagine ways in which nighttime, club culture, entertainment and escape can address our current, immaterial state of being, going beyond its mere representation, and offering radical alternatives by which to move into the future. Tim Lawrence (2003) argues:

If the party won’t cure the problems of the world it might still be the place where we can begin to imagine a new one. Dancing, mixing, bonding, communicating, working, building, and praying, the night still shimmers with a utopian hope that daylight has yet to deliver. (Lawrence, 2003, p. 441)

Alan Ruiz asks in *Life After Sundown: Disco Architecture in the Global City*, “in what ways might we look to the eccentricity of dance culture as a prototype for creating forms of community that resist the hegemonic and white-washed standardization at work today.” While he continues by arguing:

Maybe it is disco, after all, that might serve as an example to rewrite the code and build an architecture of inclusion. The dialectical space of the disco perhaps affords some clues in proposing an open-plan to ‘move together rhythmically’ and shake the habitual development of urban life. (Ruiz, 2017)

Taking a look at the past, one of the reasons rave culture in the United Kingdom came into being, was as a response to the individualistic politics of the time. “Thatcher’s ideology was that there was no such thing as society, just collections of individuals involved in the exchange of commodities”, Simon Reynolds points out when discussing the politics of rave culture. (Reynolds, 2013,p.672) In that climate, Reynolds refers to rave as a “proto-political” form for its collectivism while he describes it as an inferential, “constructive riot”. (ibid., p.673)

It may seem that we are under similar conditions in our current society, as Bauman suggests, “ours is, as a result, an individualized, privatized version of modernity, with the burden of pattern-weaving, and the responsibility for failure falling primarily on the individual’s shoulders.” (Bauman, 2000, p.7-8)

As such, we may look at the mutation of the discotheque, the rave, for its spontaneous, ‘proto-political’, transient nature as a lesson for how to move club culture forward.

V

# THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE DISCOTHEQUE

Behind all of these episodes finally lies a far wider discussion, not there to help people design clubs, but to insist that architecture encompass what goes on in it as part of its scheme.

And yet nightclubs should never be exiled as informal curiosities. They endorse the power of architecture which erects conflicting shards as spatial stimulants around its occupants...On a larger scale, cities can take some of this too. They could hardly suffer from a few pins being stuck in them, in just the right places.

Coates, (1981), p.8

Aaron Betsky referred to the discotheque as “one of the most radical environments Western society has created in the last 50 years.” (Betsky, 1997, p.160) Amongst the radical excess, pleasure and interiority at offer, those environments are also producers of “ecstatic experiences: performances that are simultaneously both public and private, allowing users to temporarily transcend the political and physical limits of the outside world—and perhaps themselves.” (Ruiz, 2017) The discotheque’s spatial characteristics resembled the night in many ways starting from the necessity for a predominantly dark environment. Tucked behind rigid structures that ensure their seclusion from the outside world, discotheques are predominantly interiors rather than entire buildings. As Nigel Coates mentions, “invariably hidden beneath ordinary city buildings, these clubs take on the project of the night by burying themselves.” (Coates, 1981, p.4) While he continues, “underground they are free to promote what rarely could happen in the streets, to give a contrived reality to what would otherwise be unlikely, taboo, or at best occasional.” (ibid, p.4)

The experience is also largely based on triggering all five senses and simultaneously creating the conditions for the loss of one’s daytime self, as for example in Mancuso’s parties where there were no mirrors or clocks to be seen. The lack of clocks diffused the notion of time and provided the visitors with a chance to leave their “socialized selves” behind, meaning “the person who has to get up at a certain time, leave work at a certain time, etc. – and experiment with a different cycle.” (Lawrence, 2003, p. 24)

In terms of their interior design, discotheques have always been “less obviously architectural” as their spatial significance derives mostly from their contents, furniture, decorations and equipment rather than “their inherent architectural quality.” (Coates, 1981, p.4-5) Sylvia Lavin discusses New York’s Electric Circus as an even further immaterial experience when she mentions, “the frame and the architectural apparatus from which it was constituted – the building, both its structure and its space – became irrelevant, a mere prop to the interior as such.” (Lavin, 2014, p.97)

Throughout the decades, as shown in the comparison between figures 2 & 3, the contents that came to define discotheques became even less evident. The material excess that characterized most of their interiors from the mid-sixties until the mid-eighties, examples including Studio 54, Area Club in New York and the Italian discos, gave way to emptier, more transient environments. Environments even less dependent on their content and more on their immaterial qualities, effects that defined space through alternative means, using light and sound as materials “to squeeze the empty space out of the existing room and refill it with a semi-solid environment.” (Lavin, 2014, p.97) These elements create a momentary architecture whose shape is continuously transforming according to its occupants for the night and which escapes “the concreteness that normally characterizes the fixity of the built environment.” (Ruiz, 2017)

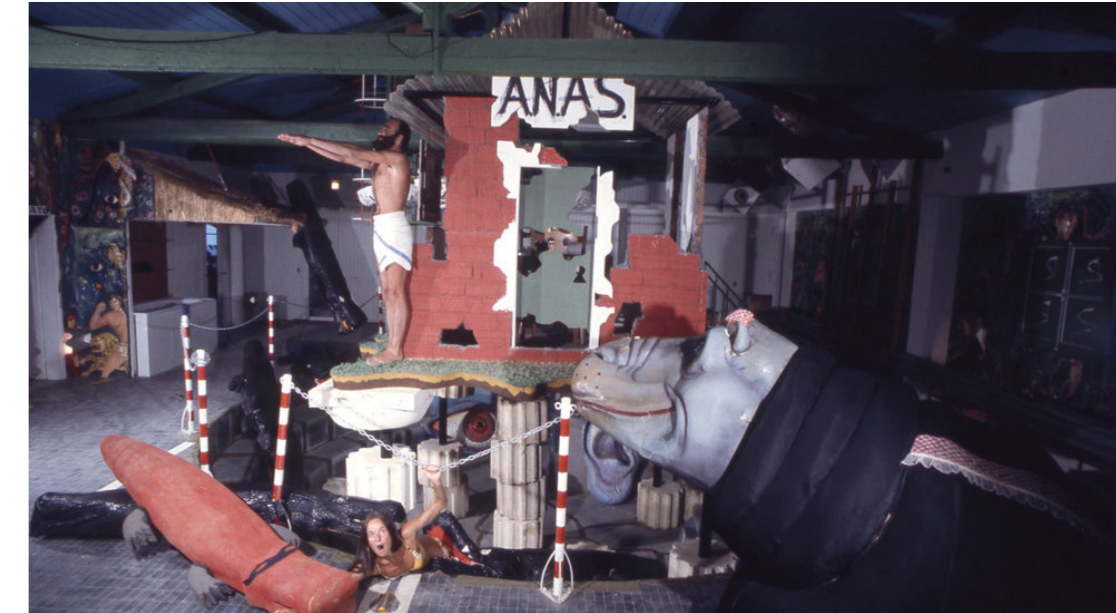


fig. 4 The interior of Bamba Issa discotheque in Forte dei Marmi (Binazzi,1970)



fig.5 The interior of BAR discotheque in Rotterdam (Angelopoulou, 2017)

# Why do we think that space is not made by sounds and perfumes or by the dark?

The Radicals - Lavin, (2014) p. 104



fig. 6 The elements of The Club (Bureau A, 2016)

## The Elements

The realization that space, the actual square meters, is almost irrelevant in immersing one's self in the experience is the first step in defining the key parameters that constitute the disco typology. This is evident in Bureau A's THE CLUB project, a modular 'noise cabin' able to host a small amount of people and adapt in several locations. What one can notice in reducing the entire architecture of the discotheque in an array of elements is how it can really recreate the entire experience by focusing on its most essential parts. These elements are not what one would usually expect, walls, windows, doors etc., but instead it is the composition of a DJ booth, speakers, a bar and an entrance. Being able to make use of existing locations, even if their ambience is an important parameter for the project's success, highlights the secondary nature of traditional architectural elements and the rise of an ephemeral typology that reflects the actual experience of the party.

**Sound** [hearing]

Probably the most essential element in the typology of the discotheque then, is sound. Sound is measured using the decibel scale (dB) or the decibel A-weighting sound levels (dBA) and discotheques, as most interiors, follow a series of sound regulations that allow music to be played up a certain dBA level (104 dBA).

A sound system, comprised of a series of speakers that cover sound’s ten octaves, communicates the music from the source to the crowd. As seen in Bureau A’s example, a sound system can create space or define it, based on the location of each speaker. To limit sound to a certain location and prevent unnecessary spreading of it one can, for example, mount loudspeakers at the ceiling of a structure and have them face downwards. (SoundAdvice, n.d.)

At the same time, as sound interacts with the environment that it occupies, it is also important to take into consideration the materials and surfaces of the surroundings and the new spatial experiences such interactions can produce. As architect Beppe Riboli mentions, “the sound depends not only on the quality of the speakers but also on the shape of ceilings and walls”. (Riboli, 2015, p.152) Additionally, materials that reflect sound, such as metals, cause it to reverberate and create music distorting echo and possible noise paths harmful for people’s hearing. Alternatively, damping or absorptive materials, such as fabrics, improve the quality of music reproduction by lessening noise levels and preventing resonance in materials such as glass.

**Darkness and Light** [sight]

The second most important parameter is the presence of darkness as the dominant domain, which directly reduces sight’s supremacy to the rest of the senses. Paul Esteve argues, “against visual stability, the discotheque brings back the struggle of light and darkness into space.” (Esteve, 2015, p. 55) The use of light then is not intended to illuminate the dark space but instead to create another kind of spatial experience with the incorporation of an array of light effects including black lights, strobe lights, neon lights, lasers, side- or video projections and reflective disco balls that produce several visual effects.

The different shapes which light produces, the speed in which it alternates and most importantly, all the different colors it comes in are further contributors to a euphoric experience. “The effect of lights and shadows, of sight and darkness, would lose the visitor in the cathartic ritual of an astonishingly new social space” as Esteve discusses. (Esteve, 2015, p. 53) Some color variations are evident in the following figures (fig.6 & 7) where the source color filters are traced along with the whole spectrum of colors they produce. In general, however, filters may cover the entire color spectrum.



Fig. 7 The light effects produced by the mirror ball and spotlights in the 24-hour museum by AMO and Francesco dVezzoli (Burrichter,2012)

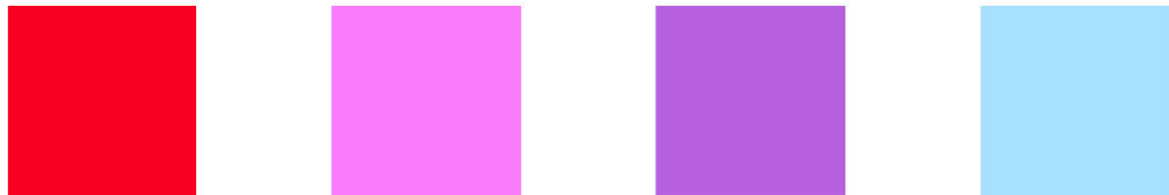


fig. 8 Angelopoulou, 2017



Fig. 8-9 Color-filtered spotlights at Rotterdam nightclub BAR (Angelopoulou, 2017)

**Smoke and Fog** [sight & smell]

Another effect that places the disco experience beyond the boundaries of canonic perception is the presence of smoke or, in recent times, dry ice. Originally produced from the cigarette smoke of the club's patrons, smoke is complimentary to other effects, as for example lights where it gives "a three-dimensional effect to the light show". (Riboli, 2015, p.152) After the smoking ban in interior spaces, smoke/ dry ice machines are used as replacements, producing the same effect along with a distinctive scent that remains in visitors' memories.



fig. 10 Photographer/artist Chen Wei uses nightclub goers' recollections of a night out to fabricate scenes in full in his studio. The picture above portraits smoke as a key factor of those recollections. (Wei, 2015)





fig. 11-14  
Photographic series showing  
how smoke transforms and  
even dissolves the physical  
environment it occupies.  
(Angelopoulos, 2017)

Temperature and Humidity [smell & touch]

The temperature and humidity in a nightclub are relative parameters relying highly on people’s presence and the amount of bodies moving together in the space. On a research visit at a Rotterdam nightclub, BAR, on an extremely busy weekday, I took a series of measurements through the course of the night to monitor the variations in temperature and humidity. (fig.15)

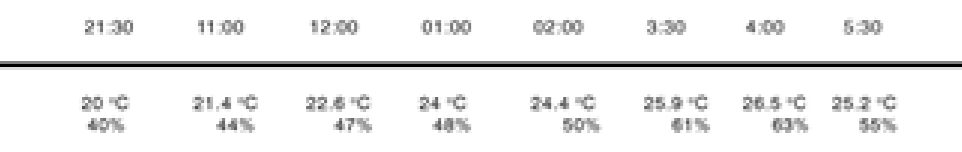


Fig. 15 Chart showing the variations of temperature and humidity in the time span of a busy night. (Angelopoulou, 2017)

From the results one can notice that the highest temperature and humidity levels occur in the early morning hours by the increase in the number of dancing patrons. Although changes in temperature and humidity are unintended byproducts of the dancers’ physical activity, they may in effect increase the vitality and excitement of both dancers and onlookers. Finally, materiality, ventilation and climate control devices can play an important role in the regulating of temperature and humidity.

The dancers [touch]

Another key parameter that the discotheque space provides is the physical proximity of the dancers, which leads to a momentary loss of individuality. The rise of a communal entity for the course of the night is part of the dance floor’s ability to dissolve personal boundaries. As Tim Lawrence comments on the Loft’s power to achieve this, “unable to avoid body contact on all sides, individual dancers had little choice but to dissolve into the amorphous whole, and, as the distinctions between self and other collapsed, they relinquished their socialized desire for independence and separation.” (Lawrence, 2003, p.25) Paradoxically, the body with all senses triggered during this spatial experience is closer to itself and its individuality as expressed through the movement of dance, yet, at the same time it is rendered in unison with the other bodies dancing next to it through the rhythmic beat. Paul Esteve highlights the impact of the space on the individual when he mentions, “the discotheque might be understood to create an apparatus that allows us to be within an alternative cognitive system. In that sense, it woks as a piece of art when it allows us to question the meaning of the individual and the collective without conventional representational constrains.” (Esteve, 2015, p.56)

‘Allatonceness’

Roland Barthes described the experience of the discotheque, specifically that of Le Palace in Paris, with its innovative experiential instruments combined as, “something very old, which is called la Fête and which is quite different from Amusement or Distraction: a whole apparatus of sensations destined to make people happy, for the interval of a night. What is new is this impression of synthesis, totality, of complexity: I am in a place sufficient unto itself.” (Barthes, 1978)

The most important factor of experiencing the discotheque, which one can spot in Barthes’s description, is the concept of “allatonceness” coined by Marshall McLuhan who, in The Medium is the Massage, explains, “ours is a brand-new world of allatonceness. ‘Time’ has ceased, ‘space’ has vanished. We now live in a global village...a simultaneous happening.” (McLuhan, 1967, p.63) The term refers to a moment of “all-at-once-ness” where everything occurs at the same time. As Sylvia Lavin comments on Andy Warhol’s Electric Plastic Inevitable (EPI: a multimedia spectacle and performance that took place at the Electric Circus), “one of the reasons the EPI is well known is because Marshall McLuhan used it as a model of his concept of allatonceness, which he saw as a regenerative and retribalising unity of mediums and experience.” (Lavin, 2014, p.97) It is thus crucial for all the elements to work in synergy, since the absence of any one of them may lead to an awkward ‘void’. For example, try to imagine how self-conscious and restricted dancers would feel if a disco were steadily immersed in bright, industrial lighting.



fig.16 Another Chen Wei image portrays the increase in temperature during the course of a club night that causes the body to produce large amounts of sweat. (Wei, 2013)

I believe all of these equivalent spatial designs and setups are intended to allow the space to “disappear”, to free costumers from architectural constrains and to allow them to navigate their way through the music without a destination...deep into the night or even through till dawn, until they emerge out of the underground onto a damp street, waving to a taxi to bring them back to reality.

Wei, 2016, p.53

**Considerations**

There are a few considerations that surface after identifying all the elements that constitute a nightclub. First, we can rethink the size and shape of the discotheque as accommodating all those 'secondary', atmospheric elements discussed above. In this sense, it is the classic architectural parameters that become secondary and are dictated by darkness, light, sound, smoke, temperature and color in the creation of the nightclub space. Second, materiality gains a more prominent role as it is crucial in the promotion or curtailment of these atmospheric elements that the discotheque experience requires. Reflective surfaces and materials such as metals or mirrors bounce light and sound and create different auditory and visual experiences than absorbent materials such as wood or fabrics do. The flexibility of the nightclub can afford a play between such materials and textures that rarely any other type of space can. Third, given that size, shape and materiality are compliant with the requirements of the atmospheric elements, then using the latter as a toolbox has the following implications: a wider applicability, portability, instantaneity and variability. One can compose the discotheque and appropriate a number of given spaces for its accommodation. These spaces need not be fixed. The instantaneity with which the atmospheric element toolbox can be put to use and turn 'day into night', both literally and figuratively, can produce new spatial and social templates. This means that, ideally, most locations can afford to transform ephemerally into a space of social gathering, transcendence and pleasure. Furthermore, the combination of the various typologies at hand, with the variability of the elements of the toolbox can serve to create numerous different experiences that would not be possible if the disco was limited to just one, pre-established type of building. So, an interesting question that arises is, in what way can an architectural solution render portable and instantaneous the discotheque atmospheric elements?

## DESIGN PROPOSAL

## Influences

The final design is inspired by the instantaneous, transient and autonomous nature of the sound system culture that started off in Jamaica during the fifties and spread around the world and the subsequent nineties UK raves. With the idea of liquidity mentioned in The Liquid Future chapter in mind, I wanted to create a mobile, autonomous structure that could occur at any place and time.



fig. 17 Sound System Culture and the wall of speakers (Sampleface, 2013)

The design comprises of twelve 2 by 2.5 meter panels, four of which constitute the 'main' panels. Those four panels bare all the mechanical elements able to recreate the 'disco experience', the speakers, the lights and the smoke machines, referencing the wall-like structures of sound system culture. Another two panels are attached to each of the four panels that may fold or unfold in order to reduce or increase the size of the interior based on the number of people occupying it. When the size changes so does the shape of the structure, from a square, to a pentagon and up to a dodecagon increasing the area from four sq. meters to almost forty-five. Producer and DJ Mark Kamins, who was involved in the New York club scene of the seventies and eighties, discussed among others the tricks employed by notorious nightclub Studio 54. As noted by Kamins (2008), "You know Studio 54 always looked full because they had drop walls. If there were ten people it looked full because the first wall was there. When 100 people came in they opened the next wall, so the club always looked full." Inspired by this idea, I thought that a similar technique could be applied to achieve the proximity of dancers as mentioned in the previous chapter, and amplify the sense of touch.

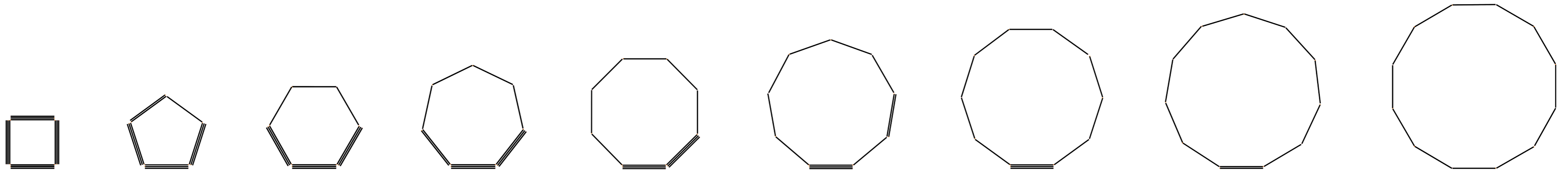


fig 18. Diagram showing the unfolding of the panels to achieve the increase in size. The main panels attach with the other two with hinges and with the rest with snap magnets (shown here in two colors indicating passive and active magnets) (Angelopoulou, 2017)

The idea to create a transient, portable structure came also after the realization of lack of physical ground dedicated to discotheques. The phenomenon of the short lived periods of clubs is not something new, yet, with the intense urbanization and gentrification of the last few decades, even clubs that managed to survive for many years are now forced to shut down and make way for apartment buildings and other developments.

Another influence was Plug-in City by Archigram for the way its individual modular units plug into a larger infrastructure. Inspired by this idea I wanted to create a unit that would be autonomous and yet 'dependable' on another, larger structure. Distinguishing it from a typical mobile disco, the structure is designed to 'plug-in', or 'hack' into any kind of *interior space* functioning as a stage, where spectacle and spectator become one. The several spatial combinations between the design and the interior it would plug into may lead to substantially increased transcendental experiences and encounters than it could achieve on its own. As the main focus is on the elements identified on the previous chapter, the purpose is to develop a design to accommodate them and provide a good starting point using materiality in such a way that it can envelope the whole scene and adapt along with it. For that reason, the final outcome is more of a hybrid between a machine/object and an interior rather than distinctively any of the two.

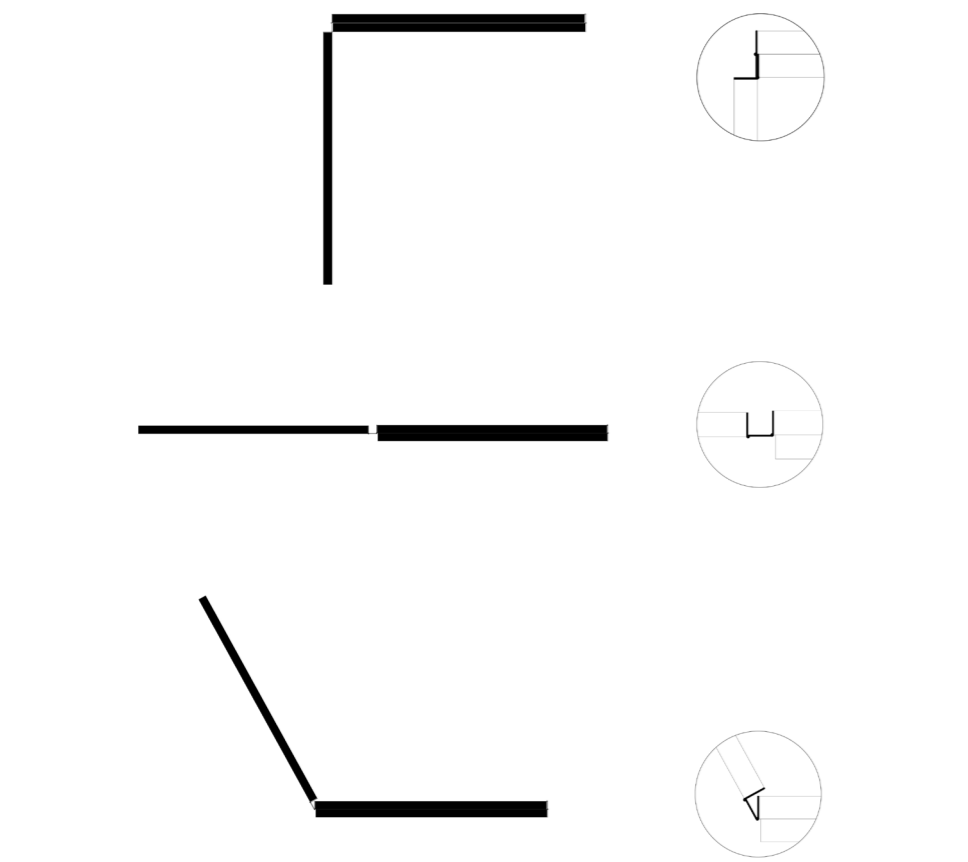


fig. 19 Detail of joint opening (Angelopoulou, 2017)

Finally, I was inspired by the Italian Radicals and their use of design as a critical tool, utilized to raise questions on consumption, aesthetics and permanence among others. In order to achieve that, they used exaggerated, bizarre forms along with kitsch, ironic and fun elements that subverted the dominant aesthetics of the time.

When closed, the interior of the design creates a dark environment, as the purpose is to be able to replicate night conditions at any time of the twenty-four hour cycle. The irony in the statement 'you don't need to go out and 'find' the night anymore, the night may come to you' is an exaggerated, critical comment on the commoditization of the night and nighttime spaces that they may as well be provided as a service. Of course, the primary reasons why I aim to recreate darkness are based on its sociopolitical qualities as described in the previous chapters.

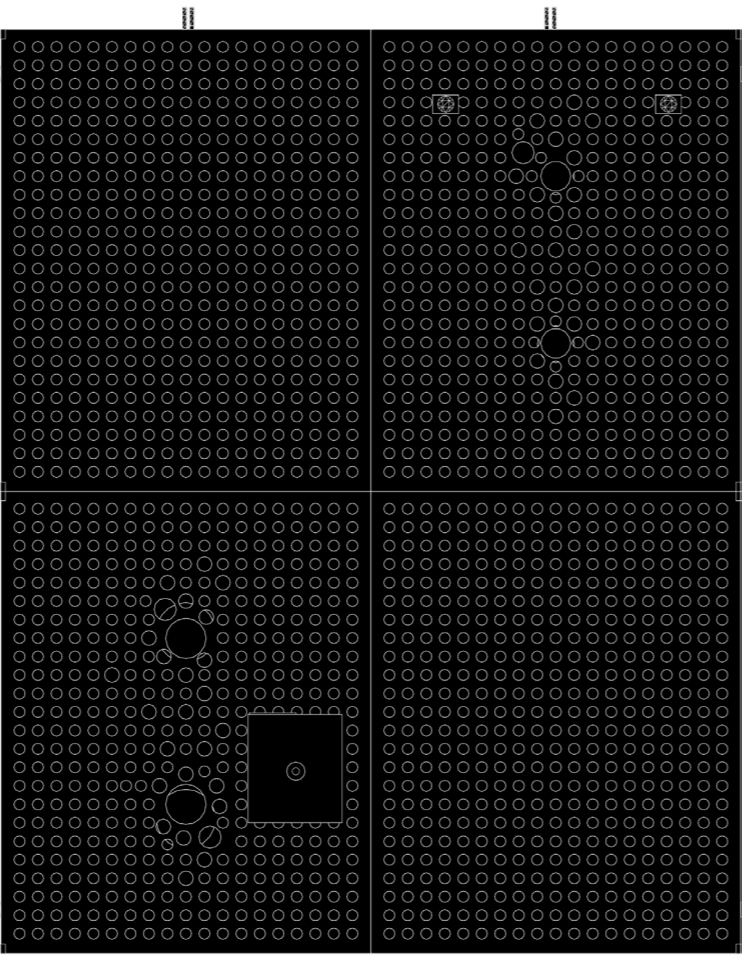


fig. 20 Front view of one of the four main panels (Angelopoulou, 2017)

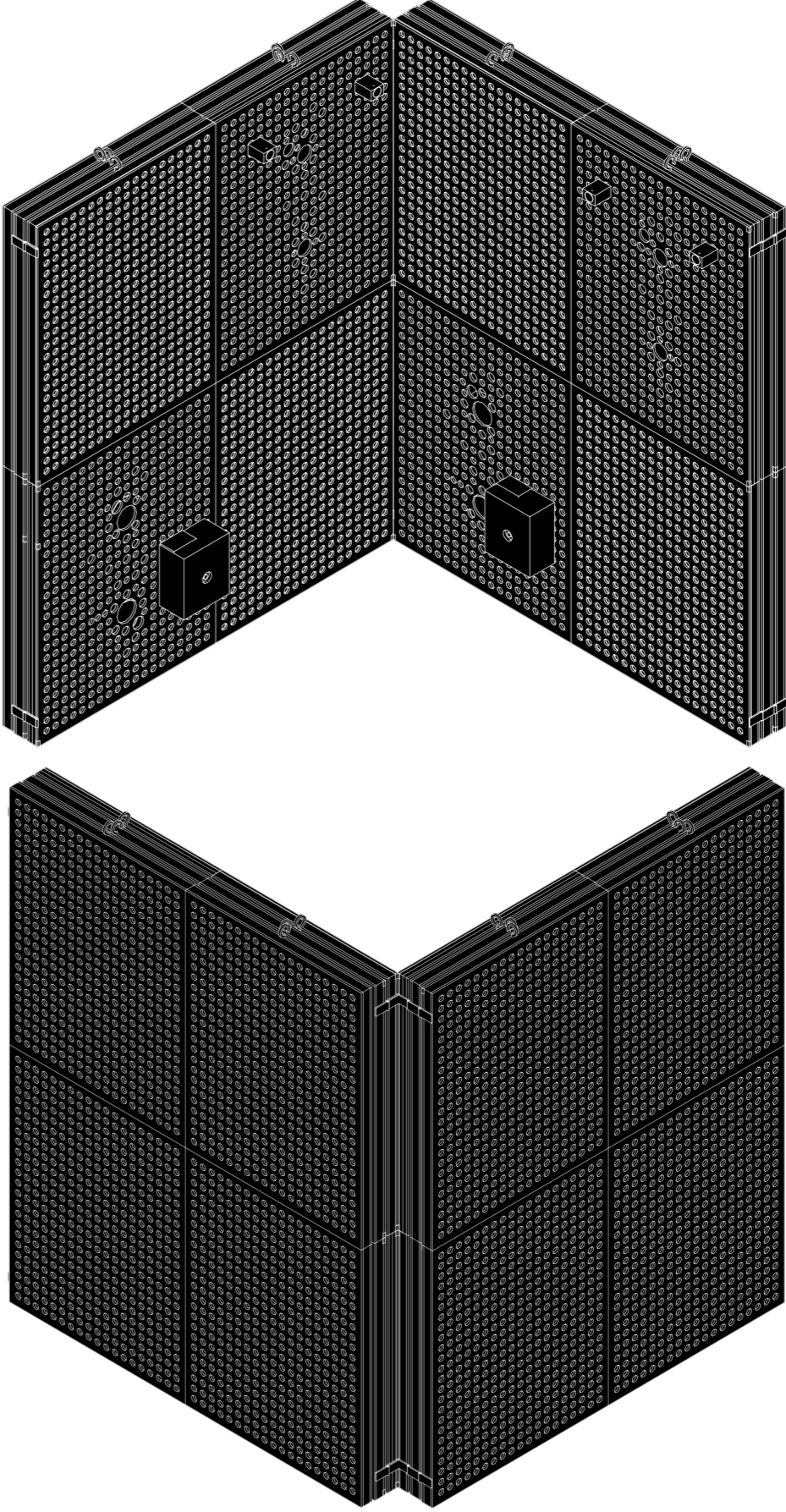


fig. 21 All four sides of the structure (Angelopoulou, 2017)

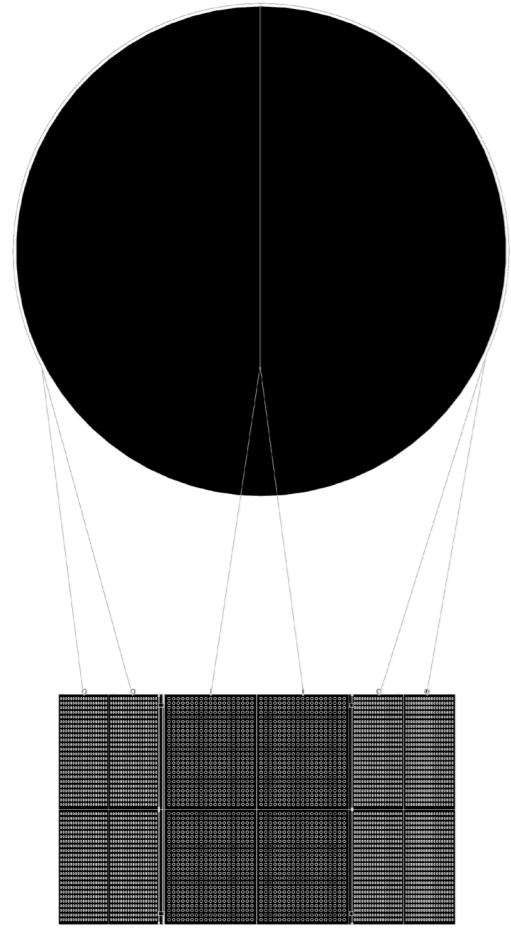


fig. 22 Impression of the inflatable roof and structure (Angelopoulou, 2017)

### Materiality and Details

Influences of the Radicals can also be found on the aesthetics of the design and especially on the roof, a large gold inflatable that may increase or reduce in size according to the size of the shape beneath it. I wanted the design to employ within its scheme a combination of colors, materials and a form that will come in contrast with most typologies it may come in contact with. Thinking how our daily lives are, to a large degree, surrounded by fairly neutral color palettes and 'unnoticeable' materials, the design shall come in contrast with that, making use of materials that celebrate its existence and nuance towards the exaggeration and excess of the disco era.

Architect Martti Kalliala insists, "we ought to try to conceive of clubs as buildings, as opposed to ephemeral interiors" (Kalliala, 2016) which is not aligned with my own point of view, and yet his ideas on how to aesthetically perceive them have, to an extend, influenced the final outcome of my design. As he mentions, "we should think of clubs as strange/queer/monolithic/opaque/uglycute/temple-like buildings" (ibid.)

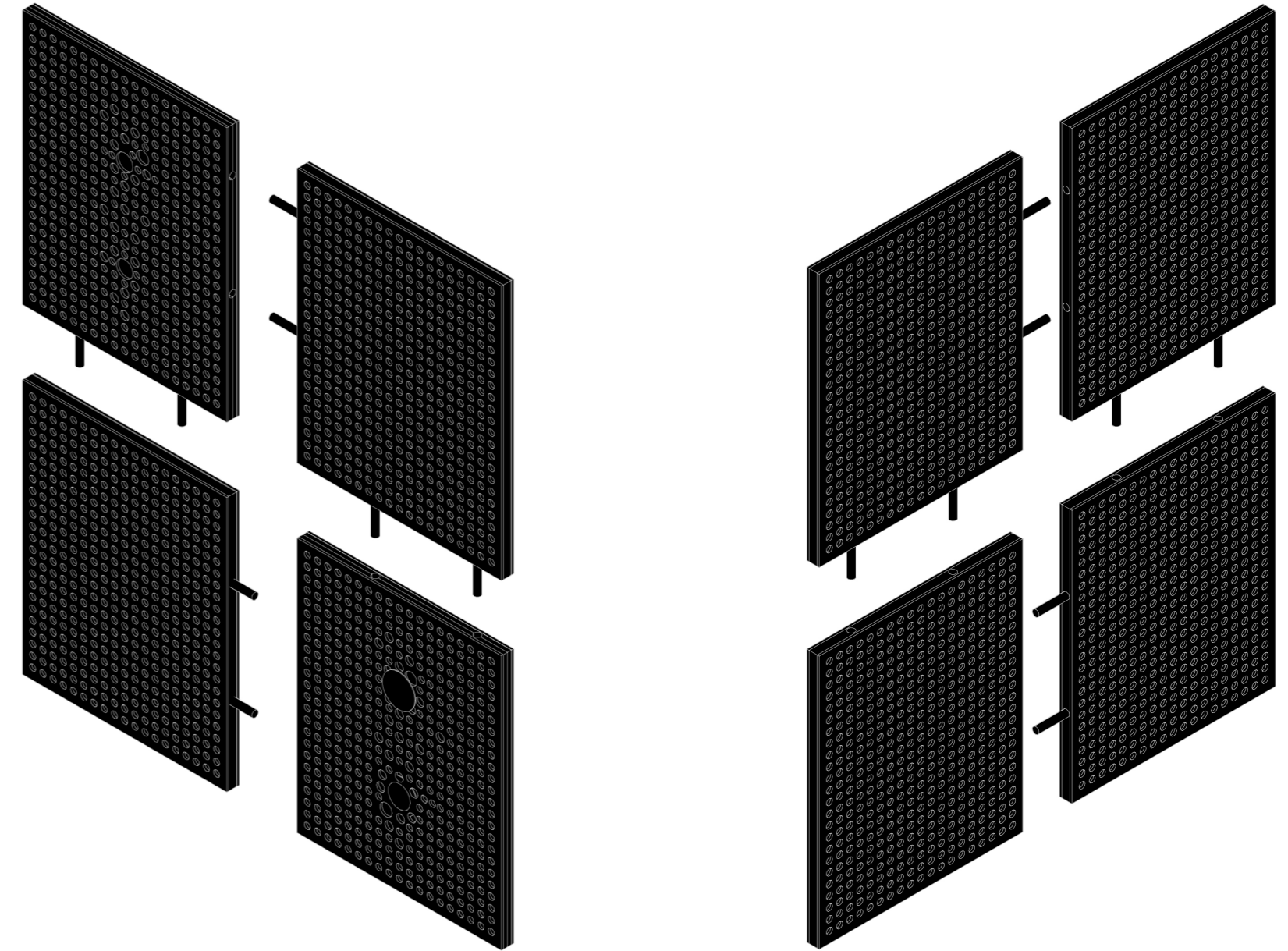
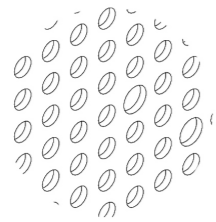
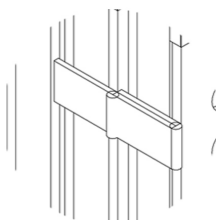
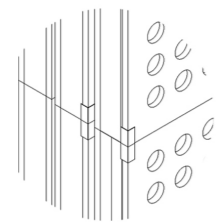


fig. 23 The panels are detachable and can be packed and transported easily (Angelopoulou, 2017)

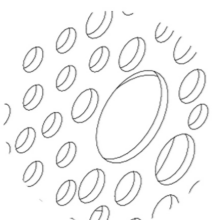
the perforated acoustic panels ensure good sound conditions. Additionally, they reference the round patterns discoballs reflect on walls as well as the perforated metal surfaces found on many historical clubs such as Space Electronic in Florence. Behind the patterned surface, a layer of LED lights is placed on the top right and bottom left of each of the main four panels



snap magnets are placed to attach the individual panels together

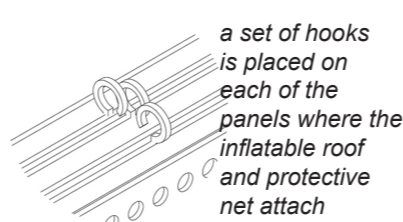


joint A

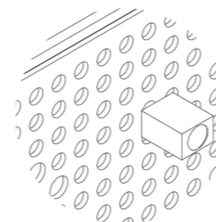


flat speakers are located on the bottom left and top right sides of the main panel. Larger openings ensure that sound comes out adequately and signify visually their position. The lower speaker is a woofer and since it produces an omni sound and its placement is not as important, while the top speakers are tweeters and midrange, located approximately at the height of the human ear. There is no designated booth for a DJ as the idea is to encourage active participation and give the chance to anyone to select the tracks of each party. A USB port or remote connection to the speakers is enough to provide the tools and an egalitarian testing ground.

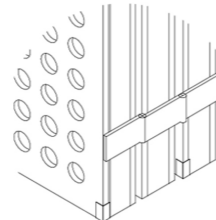
fig. 24 Diagram explaining the different parts of the panel (Angelopoulou, 2016)



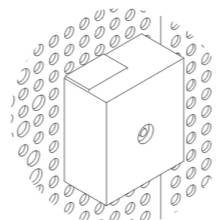
a set of hooks is placed on each of the panels where the inflatable roof and protective net attach



two remotly controlled disco lights located on the top right side



joint B



the fog machine is located on the bottom left panel

## VII

# IN (FINAL) DEFENSE OF ESCAPISM

Despite its ostensibly  
escapist nature, rave has  
actually politicized me,  
made me think harder  
about questions of class,  
race, gender, technology.

Reynolds, 2013, p. xxx

The ever-changing, multisensory environment of the discotheque has been, from its early days, a space for temporary escape from the real world. The escapist character of the discotheque has been compared to other such typologies, with the analogy between the disco and the church being the most prevailing one. Most similarities derive from the communal aspect, where large numbers of people gather with the same purpose, the DJ priest, the music and atmosphere that one can find in both. However, what marks the uniqueness of the discotheque is the elusiveness of the elements that define it, as described above, which sets it apart from the actual architecture. In contrast to the church, for example, which is very dependent on a specific architecture to create a certain experience, the discotheque can adapt to existing locations of various spatial forms.

Socially, the ephemeral escape at offer has always been an essential aid to surviving during hard economical and political times. Already in 1975 discotheques were offering a similar comfort from life's difficulties to that of the big dance halls that existed during the Great Depression in the United States. (Weller, 1975) And as Benjamin Conway comments on present conditions:

In a world of dull routine and bleak prospects, many of us seek whatever release from this monotony we can find, however illusory or brief. Yet here isn't a stark choice between marching and dancing – it's perfectly possible to do both, and much more besides; far from zapping us of all energy and anger, brief moments of escape are one of the few things that keep us feeling human, and to that extent should be celebrated. (Conway, 2015)

For this escapism discotheques have been criticized by the entire political spectrum. On the one hand, the Right has referred to them as “symptomatic of society's moral decline” (Conway, 2015), an environment of unproductive activity promoting drug and alcohol abuse. For that it has been suppressed, regulated and rendered redundant in the urban landscape. However, as Reynolds argued it is also a worthwhile and splendid form of celebration:

**Raving is a totally unproductive activity**, it's about wasting your time, your energy, your youth – all the things that bourgeois society believes should be productively invested in activities that produce some kind of return: career, family, politics, education, social or charity work . . . It's about orgiastic festivity, splendor for its own sake. (Reynolds, 2013)

It may be important to mention that this escape is partly due to the intake of substances, illegal or otherwise that affect one's perception and emotions. However, such substances are only amplifiers of the total experience and the end goal of this escape is far from the blatant act of their consumption.

On the other, the Left has made a case for this escapism being merely a “passive acceptance of the status-quo, a desire not to change the world but to momentarily drop out of it.” (Conway, 2015) Yet, if there is a need of a “working distance” in order to be able to become aware and recognize what needs to be changed in the status-quo then it is vital to maintain places that offer the opportunity to escape this cycle, at least for a short amount of time, and reflect on it. Maintaining such experiences in the urban landscape is extremely important, if not for anything more, in order to protest the normalization and banality imposed by daytime rules, just by being there and moving our bodies in non-normative ways. As Tom Glencross argues, even if the discotheque exists as a “prohibited space” for most of us, it is necessary from time to time to find ourselves in a place we shouldn’t be and “have our horizons expanded” by this transgressive experience. (Glencross, 2017)



## VIII

# CONCLUSION

In my version of the disco toolbox I can discern the fluidity and immateriality necessary in any institutional structure to survive in our current environment. However, I suspect and hope that the effect of its application will produce a very substantial circumstance for the creation of moments of heightened inner experience and essential social interaction. Such moments of escape might actually allow us to pause from our twenty-four-hour routines, make us reflect on what it is that we escape from and even think how we might be able to change it. Acting as physical 'islands' due to their inherent physical qualities, in an exponentially growing online world, discos can help balance the inequality between virtual and real social space. Maybe by transforming into transient structures able to 'hack' any kind of space they can continue to do so, and in the process make sure that the subcultures that develop around and within them continue to flourish. By providing the means for ephemeral manifestations of community, escapism and subculture, we can allow for a more democratic way, not defined by a style or particular subculture but focused on bringing people of all paths together in physical space.

It may be, as Bauman argued above, that change and uncertainty are our only constants, yet "groping in the dark" as he puts it may be hopefully done in an atmosphere that offers possibilities of personal freedom and togetherness at once.

IX

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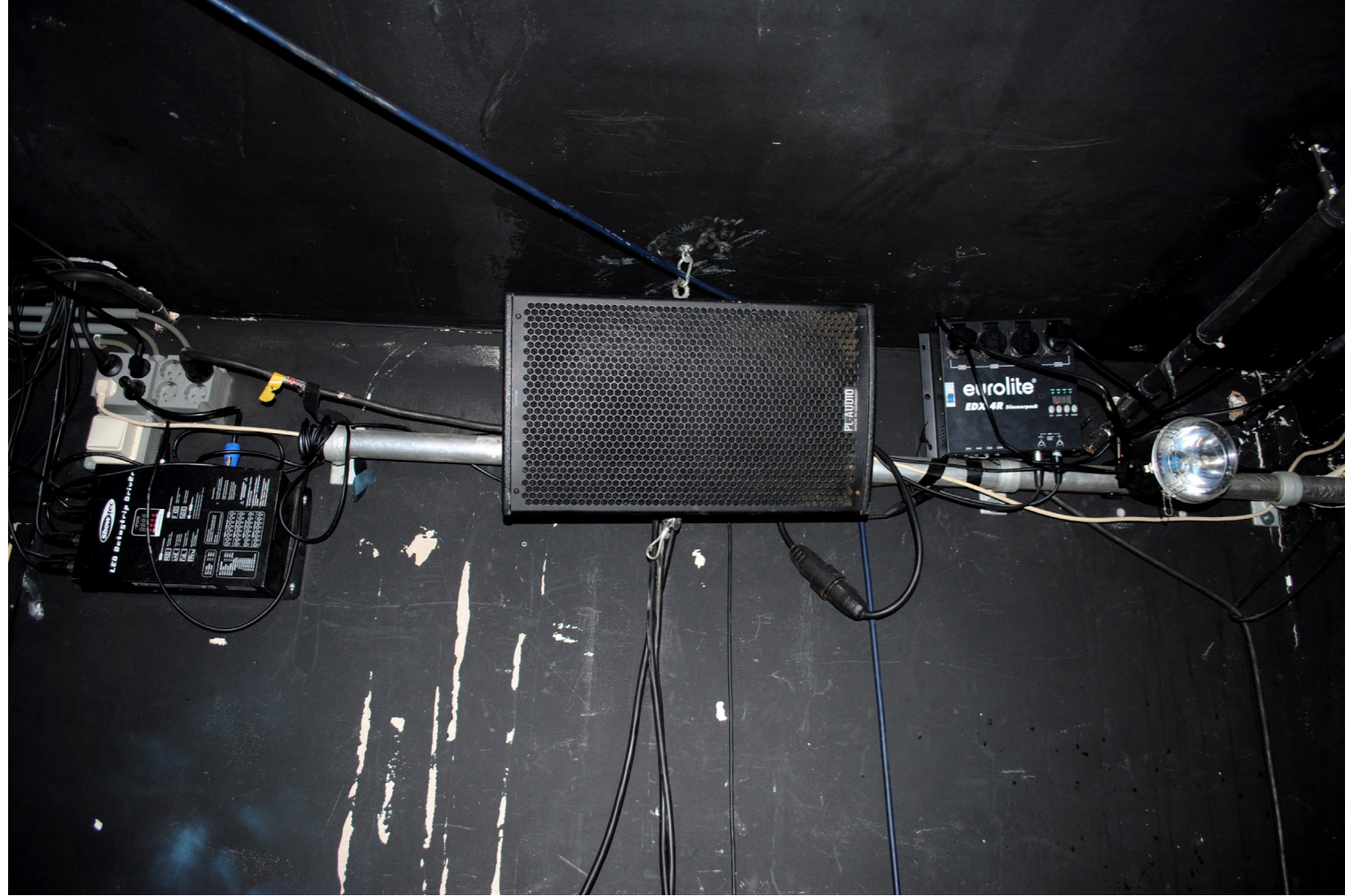
BAR NIGHTCLUB

ROTTERDAM

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